



United States
of America

Congressional Record

PROCEEDINGS AND DEBATES OF THE *107th* CONGRESS, SECOND SESSION

WASHINGTON, FRIDAY, MARCH 30, 2001

Senate

EMPOWERING PARENTS ACT OF 2001

Mr. CARPER. Mr. President, I am very pleased to join today with my distinguished colleague from New Hampshire and a broad, bipartisan group of cosponsors to introduce the Empowering Parents Act of 2001. Senator JUDD GREGG has been a consistent champion of charter schools and a passionate advocate of competition and choice in public education. I cannot imagine a better colleague to partner with on my first legislative initiative in the U.S. Senate.

Like the Senator from New Hampshire, I come from a small State. Also like my friend from New Hampshire, I was once the governor of my small State. I think it is appropriate, that Senator GREGG and I have seen fit to team up so early in my tenure here in the Senate. During the fall campaign, I was fond of saying that we need more people in Washington who think and act like Governors. My years in the National Governors' Association taught me that Governors tend to be results-oriented and tend to have a healthy impatience for partisan bickering.

We in this Chamber will always have our disagreements. Next week, for example, we are scheduled to begin debate on the budget and every expectation is that it will be a very partisan debate. That makes it all the more important, that we push forward in those areas where we're able to reach bipartisan agreement. The issue of vouchers is one on which we are unlikely to come to a consensus. Expanding the number of charter schools and broadening public school

choice, however, is something that we can agree on, and we should.

Charter schools and public school choice inject market forces into our schools. They empower parents to make choices to send their children to a variety of different schools. That means that schools which offer what students and parents want, be it foreign languages, more math and science, higher test scores, better discipline, those schools will be full. Schools which fail to listen to their customers, to parents and students, may see their student populations diminish until those schools change. At the same time, charter schools are public schools, held to high standards of public accountability. And unlike vouchers, public school choice preserves indeed, it helps to fulfill the promise of equal access upon which public education and the common school tradition have always been premised.

In my State, we've enthusiastically embraced both the charter movement and public school choice. We introduced charter schools and statewide public school choice almost 5 years ago. A greater percentage of families exercise public school choice in Delaware today than in any other State in the Nation, and in the last year alone the number of Delaware students in charter schools has more than doubled. The evidence is that these reforms, together with high standards and broad-based educator accountability, are working to raise student achievement and to narrow the achievement gap between students of different racial and

ethnic backgrounds. Students tested last spring, at every grade level tested and in each of our counties, made significant progress when measured against their peers throughout the country, as well as against Delaware's own academic standards.

Let me tell you briefly, about one of the schools in my State that is helping to accomplish both of these goals, raising student achievement and closing the achievement gap. In Delaware, we have close to 200 public schools. Students in all of these schools take Delaware's State tests measuring what students know and can do in reading, writing, and math. We also measure our schools by the incidence of poverty, from highest to lowest. The school with the highest incidence of poverty in my State is the East Side Charter School in Wilmington, DE. The incidence of poverty there is over 80 percent. Its students are almost all minority. It is right in the center of the projects in Wilmington. In the first year after East Side Charter School opened its doors, almost none of its students met our State standards in math. Last spring, there was only one school in our State where every third grader who took our math test met or exceeded our standards. That school was the East Side Charter School.

It's a remarkable story, and it has been possible because the East Side Charter School is a remarkable school. Kids can come early and stay late. They have a longer school year. They wear school uniforms. Parents have to sign something akin to a contract of mutual responsibility. Educators are given greater authority to innovate and initiate. With highly qualified and highly motivated teachers and with strong leadership from active citizens who want to make a positive difference for their community, the East Side Charter School has become a beacon of hope to parents and students in a neighborhood where you can no longer have a pizza or newspaper

delivered to your door. It has provided parents in that community with an option for their children they might not otherwise have had.

The legislation that Senator GREGG and I are introducing today aims to make similar options available in communities all across our country, particularly in low-income communities and communities with low-performing schools, just like Wilmington's East Side. It encourages States and local districts with low-performing schools to expand public school choice. It also eliminates many of the artificial barriers to charter school financing that have prevented the supply of new charter schools from keeping pace with the growing demand among parents and students.

Language was inserted in the FY 2001 Labor-HHS appropriations bill giving students the right to transfer out of failing schools. Some similar provision will likely be included in any legislation we pass this year reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Unfortunately, the right to transfer out of a failing school will not by itself translate into a meaningful array of alternatives for parents. Nor, as far as I am concerned, will a \$1,500 voucher, though I know there is some disagreement on this point even among supporters of this bill. In some high poverty school districts, there are no higher performing schools for students to transfer into. In other districts, administrative barriers or capacity constraints could well limit the choice provided to parents to a single alternative, which may or may not be the school that parents believe best meets their child's needs. Moreover, at least in my State--and I don't pretend to know the circumstances in other States--you can't get your kid in to get an education at the private or parochial schools for \$1,500.

Unless we help to establish new charter schools in communities with low-

performing schools, and unless we provide encouragement to the States and local school districts that serve these communities to create broad and meaningful choice at the intra-district level and ideally at the inter-district level, the right to "choice out" of a failing school will be little more than an empty promise. The Empowering Parents Act aims to keep the promise by helping to ensure that parents are empowered with real choices for their children within the public school system.

The Empowering Parents Act does three things. First, it provides \$200 million in competitive grants to States and local districts with low-performing schools for the purpose of expanding public school choice. This will help to make the right to public school choice that we intend to make part of title I a meaningful right for parents with children trapped in failing schools.

Second, the Empowering Parents Act expands the credit enhancement demonstration for charter schools that passed last year and also exempts all interest on charter school loans from federal taxes. This will leverage private financing to help charter schools finance start-up costs, as well as the costs associated with the acquisition and renovation of facilities, the most commonly cited barriers to the establishment of new charter schools.

Third and finally, the Empowering Parents Act creates incentives for States to provide per pupil facilities funding programs for charter schools. According to a recent GAO report, "Charter Schools; Limited Access to Facility Financing," the per pupil allocations that charter schools receive as public schools to educate public school students are frequently just a fraction of the amount that is provided annually to traditional public schools for operating expenses and thus provide none of the funding that traditional public schools

receive for facility costs. Additionally, GAO reports that school districts that are allowed to share local facility financing with charter schools often do not. The result is that charter schools are forced to literally take money out of the classroom, dipping into funds meant to pay teachers and purchase textbooks, just so they can secure a roof over their students' heads. The Empowering Parents Act would provide matching grants to states to encourage them to level the playing field between charters and traditional public schools with respect to facility financing.

Mr. President, the call for competition and choice among accountable public schools can be heard all across America. Just 7 years ago, there was only one charter school in existence in the entire nation. Today, 36 States and the District of Columbia have charter school laws, and there are over 350,000 students attending nearly 1,700 charter schools. As fast as the movement for charters and choice has grown, the reality is that the ideal of involved and empowered parents choosing a child's school from among a range of diverse but accountable public schools remains the exception rather than the rule in America. In fact, 7 out of 10 charter schools around the country have a waiting list of students they can't accommodate. The charters and choice movement is a grassroots movement, and thus, appropriately, most of action is taking place at the state and local level. There is an old saying, however, that you must lead, follow, or get out of the way. Charters and choice are sparking innovation in schools around the country, and there is a role for the Federal Government to play in spreading the synergy.

A key role of the Federal Government in the area of education is to level the playing field for children that come from tough, disadvantaged backgrounds. We are

committed in America to the principle that every child deserves a real chance to reach high standards of achievement. I have said often that we need to start our efforts to level the playing field by ensuring that every child enters kindergarten ready to learn, which means promoting early childhood education, beginning with full funding for Head Start. However, charter schools and public school choice should also play an integral part in our efforts to close the achievement gap, because whenever a child is left trapped in a failing school, it means that we have failed as a nation to fulfill the promise of equal opportunity for all and special privileges for none.

Passing the Empowering Parents Act would represent a landmark federal commitment to parental involvement and parental empowerment in public education. It would send a clear message from coast to coast that we will no longer settle in America for a public education system that traps students in schools that fail to meet high standards. That's not a Democrat message. That's not a Republican message. That's a message of hope and opportunity, a message I believe Republicans and Democrats can embrace together.

When Lynne Cheney visited Delaware in the heat of last fall's Presidential campaign to shine a national spotlight on the East Side Charter School, it was a great tribute to the tremendous accomplishments of the parents, teachers, and administrators who have poured their energy and creativity into that remarkable school. It was also a tribute, I

believe, to our bipartisan spirit of cooperation in Delaware and to the progress that we can achieve when we work together - Republicans and Democrats, legislators and business leaders, parents and teachers. Our charters and choice legislation passed on consecutive days back in 1995. One bill was sponsored by a Republican, one by a Democrat. It was truly a bipartisan effort.

That's the way we do things in Delaware. We work together. We get things done. It is this uncommon tradition of putting aside partisan differences and doing what is right for Delaware that has enabled our State to shine. And it is this same spirit of common-sense bipartisan that is needed in Washington if America is to embrace a new century strong and confident in our future.

We will have plenty to fight about in this Chamber, this year and in the years to come. I suggest to my colleagues, let's take the opportunities we have to find common ground and to show the American people that we can work together to make a difference for communities and families across this country. As the broad bipartisan support for this legislation attests, the Empowering Parents Act provides us with an opportunity to govern in a positive, progressive, and bipartisan fashion. I ask my colleagues to join with Senator GREGG and myself to help pass the Empowering Parents Act, and thereby to register a win for bipartisanship and more importantly, a win for children trapped in schools that are failing to meet their potential or allow their students to reach their own potential.